

The One Who Lifts My Head
Psalm 3

Last week we looked at David at his poetic best in Psalm 51. After his terrible sins of adultery and murder, David was pressed up the wall of certain death and became a creative genius, pushing the envelope of God's grace as no one ever had before him. We saw how the prophets pick up his radical requests and turned them into promises God's people could count on in a New Covenant. David not only wanted to be forgiven but to be fully restored to become the man of faith he once was. To do that required the remaking of a contrite and compassionate heart. What follows is the answer to David's prayer. I call it the road to restoration. Though David was forgiven of his sins, he still had to take that terrible journey through **sin's consequences**. In the process he had to watch his sons do in public what he did in private. In the end he will grieve the death of four sons. And it will be the grief over his children that will be the tool that reshapes and remakes his heart whole once again. This tells that the road to restoration is much more complex than merely being forgiven. But David is a man after God's own heart, and by faith he will embrace sorrow and humiliation for the sake of restoration. The text is a wonderful example of how we can count on God, even when we are forced into an exile of our making. MIRROR

The journey begins when David's sons begin to imitate the behavior of their father in the royal court. Overcome by lust, **Amnon** rapes his half-sister **Tamar**, and David is made an unwitting accomplice. The act is a painful mirror to David of how God saw his adultery with Bathsheba. When David received the news he was furious, but because he was compromised by his own past, he could do nothing.

Enraged by his father's passivity, Tamar's brother, **Absalom**, takes matters into his own hands. For two years he methodically plots the revenge of his sister. Then at the opportune time during the sheep-shearing festival, he orchestrates Amnon's murder. The murder is a deafening echo of what his father did to Uriah, and again David is made an unwitting accomplice. The king, who once abused and turned a blind eye to his crimes, is now used and manipulated by his own sons. David is so outraged he wants to march out and kill his son, but Absalom sought asylum in his mother's country of Geshur, east of Jordan in Syria.

David temporarily restrained, lives **paralyzed** by a sorrow so deep he cannot sort it out. One son is dead, the other banished in perpetual exile. David's general, **Joab**, attempts to intervene to untie the Gordian knot and force a reconciliation between father and son. Like Nathan before, he conjures up a court case designed to unlock to the king's compassion in order to save a widow's sole surviving son. The plot works and the king pronounces a verdict of mercy in the form of an oath:

**"As surely as the LORD lives,
not one hair of your son's head shall fall to the ground."** (2 Sam 14:11 NIV)

Condemned by his own ruling, David is forced to summon **Absalom** back to Jerusalem, but in a cold act of pride he refuses to see his face. David would rather nurse his rage than forgive his son. For **two full years** Absalom lived in Jerusalem, but never once saw his father's face. It is difficult to imagine a greater humiliation for a son. Finally Joab forces the two to reconcile. But when they come face-to-face, only perfunctory gestures of reconciliation are made with no words of warmth. Absalom, now a bitter son, sows the seeds of discontent within the populace of Israel, offering to settle their legal disputes favorably. After **four years**, at the appropriate time, in a manner reminiscent of the battle of Jericho, Absalom sounds trumpets all throughout Israel, announcing that he is Israel's self-appointed king. As the trumpet blasts reverberated throughout the surrounding districts of all Israel, David felt the tremor in Jerusalem. For a second time in his life David is forced into exile.

You'll remember how David earlier gave **voice** to his grief in Psalm 57, when Saul, the rebellious king, had cornered him in a cave. Once again he is cornered by a rebellious king, but now the rebellious king is his own son, which magnifies David's sorrow exponentially. Psalm 3 opens with the superscription:

A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.

David never ceases to amaze me. He may have many flaws, but what supremely draws me to him is his capacity to worship and pray in every conceivable circumstance. One would think that with an army advancing on Jerusalem, David would make haste and flee taking the quickest escape route possible. Yet he does exactly the opposite; he takes the slowest route and the one most conducive for reflection and worship. Tracing the route of his journey, David exits from his palace, descends down to the valley of the Kidron, ascends up the Mount of Olives, and then descends into the desert.

The **topography** of his route **mirrors** what is happening within his soul. The opening descent depicts David's public humiliation. The king exits his palace, the *highest* point in the city, and walks the entire length of the city wall to the *lowest* point in the city, where he stops at the last house, the one that is furthest from his house. Rabbi Ari Cartun writes,

"David had to endure the dual punishments of descending the full length of the city under the humiliating stares of the population and of gazing upon the whole of his beloved capital from which he would soon be exiled."¹

David's choice of crossing at the "*furthest house*" is also deeply symbolic. Cartun continues: "If the **sewer** system of that time was anything like that of subsequent Jerusalems, the sewage probably flowed out of the city through the lowest gate, which would have been the farthest from the palace. Thus, David's first humiliation is completed by his exiting the city with the refuse."² David doesn't run away in secret. He leaves his home under the scrutiny of the public eye, on foot yet, with no royal escort, chariots or entourage. He carefully chooses his point of exit at the end of that steep descent, at that lowest, most shameful place, now an apt symbol and confession for his life.

From that low place David then ascends to the top of the **Mount of Olives** where he worships God and then descends into the dreaded wilderness. Along the way, he has five very significant encounters, three of which demonstrate amazing loyalty to him (on the ascent), while the final two hurl abuse upon him (on the descent). These encounters become spiritual tools that force David into a deep reflection that nurtures his faith and strengthens his trust. The experience was so significant David composed not just one, but two poems (Ps 3 & 63), memorializing his exit of humiliation and trust. Might this suggest that we are to become most reflective during times of exile?

Psalm three opens with a woeful cry of inadequacy.

I. David's Lament (3:1-2)

3:1 O LORD, how *many* are my foes!

How *many* rise up against me!

3:2 *Many* are saying of me,

"God will not deliver him." Selah (3:1-2 NIV)

After years of surviving the wilderness, and ascending the heights of Israel's monarchy, David is right back to that place of spiritual bankruptcy. He calls out to the Lord with that same trust as his youth. Once again facing insurmountable odds, David cries out that his enemies are too much for him. The NIV captures well the threefold cry of "**many, many, many**" (*rabbu, rabbim, rabbim*) expressing how outnumbered he feels.

David's *many* enemies include the **thousands** in Absalom's army. But even more significant was the news David received during his flight that his most trusted and brilliant advisor, **Ahithophel**, had betrayed him and joined the conspiracy (2 Sam 15:31). Ahithophel's participation in the revolt may reveal that there was a deep level of discontent with David's rule, even within the inner circle of his cabinet. The fact that Ahithophel may also have been Bathsheba's grandfather (1 Chr 3:5) would have stung David all the more.

Then to add insult to injury, as David continued his perilous descent down from the Mount of Olives, an old man named Shimei appears on the horizon. This Benjamite creates no small commotion as he comes out, ranting and raving, swearing endlessly at the top of his lungs. Then, to the utter amazement of all, he starts pelting David and his officials with stones.

"Get out, get out, you man of blood, you scoundrel! The LORD has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. The LORD has handed the kingdom over to your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a man of blood!" (2 Sam 16:7-8)

David's exit from Jerusalem gives Shimei occasion to vent a poisonous rage that he has harbored since David was anointed king in place of Saul. Shimei rejoices in David's misfortune and believes that "God will not deliver him" (3:1), for he is confident God does not hear David's prayers. The fact that this self appointed critic attacked the one area of David's innocence must have burned deeply into the soul of the king. As my friend David Roper writes, "Criticism often comes when you least deserve it, from those least qualified to give it, and in a form least helpful to receive it!"⁴

David's right hand man, Abishai, immediately offers to kill "this dead dog," (a verbal echo from the Goliath story), but David would have none of it and rebukes his friend with keen spiritual insight.

"My son, who is of my own flesh, is trying to take my life. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the LORD has told him

to. It may be that the LORD will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today.” (2 Sam 16:11,12)

David’s enemies overwhelm him and he cannot cope, but David resolves not to retaliate, instead he prays and cries out to God. It is important to keep in mind that the enemies that are mentioned in the psalms are resisting the rule of God as expressed through his representative king. They are not merely personal enemies. If God does not deliver his king, the kingdom of God is at risk. The psalms are first and foremost then a prayer book to advance God’s rule on earth through the mantle of God’s anointed king.

Thus Psalm 3 became a tool to **train Jesus** how to cope during his darkest hour. We can imagine Jesus praying this psalm in **Gethsemane** as so many enemies rose up against him. The threefold “many” consisted of the Jewish leadership that plotted his death, the Roman cohort that would carry it out, and Judas (his Ahithophel) who would betray him. And like David’s enemies, they spoke with disdain, “God will not deliver him.” The saying would sting even greater when after his crucifixion the rulers sneered at him, “*He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One*” (Luke 23:35).

In like manner, Paul tells us that our enemies are mighty, and that we are no match for them, that is the world, the flesh and the devil. But through faith in Christ and dependent prayer they can and will be defeated (Eph 6:10-13; 2 Cor 10:3-4).

From his lament, David gains a confidence that solidifies his trust.

II. David’s Confidence 3:3-6

**3:3 But you are a shield around me, O LORD;
you bestow glory on me and lift up my head.**

**3:4 To the LORD I cry aloud,
and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah**

As David gives voice to his inadequacy a mysterious confidence comes over him. In sharp contrast to the threefold “*many*” enemies of verse one, David finds solace in *three* attributes of God’s character, and focusing on them helps David break the hypnotic power of the enemy. First, he is a “**shield** around” him; God alone is the supreme protector of his soul from every angle. Second, he is one who **bestows glory** on him. In this expression, David is clinging to his identity; David knew who he was. God had anointed him as king. This was the glory given to him as a gift of God.

Therefore, David need not defend who he was, that was God's responsibility, even now in the light of his recent sins. This is why he did not have to retaliate against Shimei, or even answer him with a word. He can walk away in silent trust. He doesn't have to reclaim his glory, that is God's responsibility. Such was the faith of our Lord: *"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly"* (1 Pet 2:23).

Third, David sees God as the **one who lifts up his head**, a metaphor for public vindication. This is an especially powerful metaphor when we interpret it alongside David's flight from Jerusalem. As David was ascending the Mount of Olives the narrator describes the painful pathos of the whole nation identifying with his humiliation.

**But David continued up the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went;
his head was covered and he was barefoot.**

**All the people with him covered their heads too
and were weeping as they went up. (2 Sam 15:30)**

It is one thing to identify to identify with your king in his victory, quite another to embrace his shame. But that is what David's loyal followers did. Then, just after David heard the news that Ahithophel had betrayed him, he prayed to God that he would thwart the counsel of Ahithophel. No sooner had those words left his lips then "God answered from his holy hill." As David came to the summit of the Mount of Olives, he found a sympathetic friend.

**When David arrived at the summit (lit. "the head"),
where people used to worship God,
Hushai the Arkite was there to meet him,
his robe torn and dust on his head. (2 Sam 15:32)**

Ari Cartun captures the literary beauty of the scene.

The appearance of a man with dirt on his head furthers the irony in the scene. That is, on the 'head' (summit) of the mount, the head of state, who is fleeing a pretender to the crown, is met by a man whose head is crowned with dirt, yet who will be instrumental in ensuring that the crown stays on David's head... And, in this vein, it is significant that it is the Mount of Olives that David ascends to the head of, for it is the oil of the olive that anoints the head of the kingdom.⁵

David sees Hushai as the **divine gift** of God that lifts up his head. David asks Hushai to demonstrate his loyalty by risking his life to act as a mole (spy) within Absalom's palace to thwart the counsel of Ahithophel. In this way God lifts his head, instantly providing David with the very means to overthrow his enemies. This suggests to us that dependence on God is not contrary to the use of "means." If you are diagnosed with cancer, it is just as much a miracle if God heals you through the "means" of good medicine, as choosing to do it directly with no human intervention. David's faith is not opposed to seeing the gift of God in the resources he has placed right in front of him. By the grace of God David is able to set up a spy network from Jerusalem to the wilderness by means of several loyal friends.

As David experiences God lifting up his head, he then exercises the supreme act of trust by laying down his head and going to **sleep**.

**3:5 I lie down and sleep; I wake again,
because the LORD sustains me.**

**3:6 I will not fear the tens of thousands
drawn up against me on every side.**

In light of his newfound confidence, David makes it his resolve to go to sleep. God's presence has completely removed any sense of fear. So there is no need for wine or pills to quell his stress, just an act of faith to lie down in the full confidence that he will safely wake in the morning.

With God on our side it matters little how "*many*" the enemy has, with God we will always abide in the majority (2 Kgs 6:16-17). Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," expresses it so well.

**And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.**

Did you ever consider sleep as a supreme act of trust? It is in the face of fear (Mark 4:38). This was the ultimate act of trust for our Lord, who gives himself over to sleep the sleep of death, trusting in a God who will resurrect him (Luke 23:46).

Working his way from lament through confidence, David now gives voice to his request.

III. David's Petition 3:7

3:7 Arise, O LORD!

Deliver me, O my God!

Strike all my enemies on the jaw;

break the teeth of the wicked.

With his confidence renewed, David now petitions God to vindicate him through his deliverance and to subsequently punish his enemies. The two metaphors he uses to describe his desire for his enemies speak of **humiliation** and **impotency**. (The NIV translates these verbs as imperatives, while the NASB translates them as completed action, giving expression to a renewed confidence - "For You have smitten all my enemies on the cheek; You have shattered the teeth of the wicked"). When you strike someone on the **cheek**, it means he has no defenses left and that you have humiliated him. The second metaphor, "**break the teeth of the wicked**," suggests that David's enemies are like voracious animals, who tear their prey from limb to limb. But with no teeth, these wild animals are rendered impotent. Regardless which translation is to be preferred, David's longing is just, and finds its application in our spiritual enemies, who we long to be rendered powerless.

When **Jesus** taught us to forgive our enemies, it was because he had intensified the battle defeating the ultimate enemy, the devil. And thus we pray that God would take "the bite" out of the demons that surround us, and humiliate the idols of the world as impotent imposters. And in the destruction of evil around us, we as the church are declared to be the true sons of the living God.

David's concludes his prayer with praise.

IV. David's Praise & Benediction 3:8

3:8 From the LORD comes deliverance.

May your blessing be on your people. Selah

The confidence that buoyed him through the hurtful accusations, now settles him in a perfect peace. The psalm ends in the full assurance of deliverance. The deliverance and restoration of Israel's king will have incredible impact on God's people, infinite blessings.

The three uses of the term “**deliverance**” make it the theme word that ties the psalm together. Each use has a different tone, and taken together reveal the spiritual progress David makes in his soul through prayer. It was **first** used in the lament section (vs 2), when David articulated his enemies’ mocking cry that “there is no *deliverance* for him in God.” From that stinging accusation David has to refortify his trust by reminding himself of the many reasons that their claim is not true. There even in the aftermath of his sin, God has not abandoned his chosen one.

After having his confidence stabilized and renewed, David is then able to pray in **verse 7**, “*Deliver me, O my God.*” The petition once expressed is bolstered with such assurance, that the third and final time the term is used it lands in quiet praise in verse 8, “from the LORD comes *deliverance.*”

The Hebrew term “*deliverance*” carries with it not only the idea of God’s intervening rescue, but as John Sawyer points out, also the sense of “because it is **right.**”⁶ Thus God’s king can count on God’s rescue because justice demands it. As Waltke writes, “It is not right that Satan should hold nations in his sway, nor that the world with its phony value system should have dominion over God’s people, nor that death should have the last word. Therefore, we are to pray confidently to God for deliverance really expecting to see Him do so.”⁷

“*Deliverance*” (*yeshu’a*) is also the word from which the name **Jesus** is derived and reminds us in the threefold repetition of the term that Jesus “will *save* his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21).

Perhaps this theme of deliverance is the reason why the editors of the book of Psalms placed this psalm as the first in the Psalter (Psalm 1 & 2 serve as an introduction), and that for centuries it was used as a morning prayer (3:6). It certainly reminds us that we cannot be naïve about the forces we face, and though we are promised certain victory through faith and prayer in Christ, it is hard won. We shall indeed crush the serpent under our feet, but not without our heel being bruised (Gen 3:15).

¹ Ari Mark Cartun, *Topography as a Template for David's Fortunes during His Flight before Avshalom*, *Journal of Reformed Judaism*, Spring 1991, 21.

² Cartun, *Topography as a Template for David's Fortunes*, 21.

³ I am indebted to Bruce Waltke for this insight.

⁴ David Roper, *A Man to Match the Mountain* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1996), 211.

⁵ Cartun, *Topography as a Template for David's Fortunes*, 25.

⁶ Vetus Testamentum, 1965. Quoted from Bruce Waltke, *Night Sermon*, 1985 Day of Prayer, Regent College.

⁷ Waltke, *Night Sermon*, 1985 Day of Prayer.